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# RESEARCH BRIEF

*We stand for the restoration of existing urban centers and towns within coherent metropolitan regions, the reconfiguration of sprawling suburbs into communities of real neighborhoods and diverse districts, the conservation of natural environments, and the preservation of our built legacy. Charter of the New Urbanism<sup>2</sup> (2000)*

*Ask Sandra Williams to describe a typical week in Valencia and you'll discover one busy young lady. She cares for her horse, practices rock and jazz on her drums . . . there's also school work, walking down the paseo with her friends to go shopping, and lots of family outings. Which means Sandra enjoys the best of city activities and a country lifestyle, right in her neighborhood. Newhall Land and Farming Company advertisement<sup>3</sup> (1997)*

*A city's very wholeness in bringing together people with communities of interest is one of its greatest assets. . . . In most big cities, we Americans do reasonably well at creating useful neighborhoods belonging to the whole city. People with similar and supplementing interests do find each other[.] Jane Jacobs<sup>4</sup> (1961)*

## NEIGHBORHOOD: A KEY CONCEPT FOR DEVELOPMENT AND PLANNING

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*Neighborhood Councils will be groups of people . . . certified by the Board of Neighborhood Commissioners [to] elect their own leaders, determine their own agendas, and set their own boundaries. . . . People would be truly empowered to guide the futures of their neighborhoods. City of Los Angeles Department of Neighborhood Empowerment<sup>1</sup> (2001)*

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As these epigraphs suggest, the neighborhood is a central concept in the design professions (architecture, planning, landscape architecture) and in those enterprises (such as real estate development, appraisal, and finance) whose practices or policies define the context within which city building takes place. Like other such keywords (for example community and suburb) the meaning ascribed to neighborhood has varied over time and the use of the term in one period or moment has been determined by that particular context and the intended audience.

Within this admittedly broad field there are two domains where the term has had and retains a prominent, perhaps dominant, standing for scholars, practitioners, and the lay public. One is associated with a tradition of social reform which has sustained a literature on cities and their development (whether growth or decline) in which neighborhoods are considered a naturally occurring mode of social relations, the product of proximity, concentration, and a tendency for people to associate with those with whom they have repeated interaction. Scholars and pundits writing in this tradition, such as Jane Jacobs, consider the material city a secondary factor. The human-shaped physical environment might deter or promote social interaction and ties of neighboring, but the desire to form local attachments will triumph if it is fostered or, if need be, it is regulated through incentives.



The other is associated with those primarily in design and development, who advocate a particular pattern of physical planning, for example, the open plan and interior common favored by proponents of garden suburbs, the higher-density and mix of uses we find along Jane Jacobs's Hudson Street in New York City, or the middle ground rendered in New Urbanist-style transit-oriented developments. These practitioners begin with the presupposition that physical form is generative and that proper design is a means toward an end.

Good planning will promote social interaction, enhance the quantity and presumably the quality of social exchange, and improve neighborhood formation.

Despite common interests and shared objectives social reformers and physical planners have understood their endeavors to be distinct and discrete. Advocates of one or the other have striven to ensure that their perspective on neighborhood was the predominant, even normative framework for analysis, problem definition, and action—this despite the fact that representatives from both groups imagine neighborhoods as a building block, a constitutive element for the city and its suburbs, part of the physical pattern and the social structure of the metropolis. Where they have differed has been in the assignment of provenance. Which takes precedence, people or place? Will a harmonious citizenry create an orderly city? Will a rational, efficient layout of buildings, lots, blocks, and streets



promote social harmony? We can understand the use of the term neighborhood as the ebb and flow between these two interrelated yet opposing conceptions.

At the start of the twentieth century, reformers and sanitarians surveyed and administered to the needs of the indigent, the working poor, and immigrants in cities transformed by industrial capitalism. Jane Addams, the founder of Hull House, a settlement house on Halsted Street in Chicago, wrote of the Italian immigrant in awe of a rose and her disbelief that it was grown in America; she had never been beyond a few block radius of her tenement. For reformers like Addams, the immigrant enclave was both of the city and not. They viewed the inhabitants of Little Italy, Kleindeutschland, and the like as figures suspended between traditional peasant culture in their countries of origin and their new lives as citizens of the modern city. Reformers conceived of the neighborhood as a bridge spanning this divide; it was at once a place defined by custom and tradition (in this sense almost anti-urban) and a vital part of the metropolis.

Ernest W. Burgess and his colleagues in urban sociology at the University of Chicago also viewed the neighborhood as a sub-unit within the city, a discrete place defined by its ecology (which they viewed as the product of location, the movement of people, and institutions), its local culture and cultural patterns (the sum of sentiment, conduct, attachments, and ceremonies), and its "community consciousness" (a product of proximity, propinquity, and "political community").<sup>5</sup> Burgess's colleague, Robert Park, viewed the neighborhood as a community's natural area, defined by group experience and a sense of territorial parochialism. We can trace their attention to the neighborhood as an ideal type, a unit of analysis and the appropriate site and scale for intervention, to the settlement house whose advocates believed that face-to-face relations among neighborhood residents would create community in spite of the threatening anomie and dislocation of the industrial city.

As reformers sought to retain social bonds and to promote the formation and retention of civic, religious, and economic institutions

within neighborhoods, design professionals formulated plans and proposals for building neighborhoods. These projects have ranged in size and type from infill and redevelopment to entire new towns. Regardless of scale or form, the intent of all such proposals has been to provide an infrastructure for the creation and maintenance of community. Ebenezer Howard's proposal for an integrated urban system of independent yet related garden cities (first presented in Tomorrow, A Peaceful Path to Real Reform [1898]), inspired garden suburbs in Letchworth (begun 1902) and Welwyn (1920) England. The careful zoning of land uses, a density that permitted privacy yet encouraged chance encounter, the regularly sited yet picturesque structures set in a landscape groomed to emulate a gentleman's estate are signature aspects of Raymond Unwin's and Barry Parker's design that have become a standard for like projects in Europe, North America, and elsewhere.<sup>6</sup>

Clarence Perry, Henry Wright, and other members of the Regional Planning Association of America (RPAA) defined a distinctly American variant of the garden suburb that Perry disseminated as the neighborhood unit in a volume of the Regional Plan of New York and Its Environs (1929). These planners conceived of the neighborhood unit as a module for city building appropriate for new towns or the renewal of "blighted" urban districts. A centrally located primary school and community center would promote identity and serve as the hub for a district bounded by major arterials lined with apartments, retail, and services. The boulevards fed into collector streets a system of internal circulation sized for local access to single-lot residences and parks, the latter connected by pathways for a child's walk to school. After World War II, city planners, urban designers, and real estate developers seized on the neighborhood unit idea and used it singularly or in multiples for new towns, planned unit developments (PUDs), and large-scale speculative projects in the United States and more selectively in Europe and Asia.

Over time the neighborhood unit became more a template than a framework for community, a turn Jane Jacobs seized on to challenge those whose focus on physical form (whether at the scale of a street, a district, or a city) negated the role of people as producers and consumers of place. Jacobs lived on Hudson Street in New York's Greenwich

Village where she became first a student of and then an advocate for the type of self-government born of self-interest that arose when people shared a locale. Rather than looking for neighborhood in physical terms as "self-contained or introverted units," or in social terms as a form of remnant "town life," Jacobs considered what city neighborhoods "do" and turned her attention to the formal and informal "self-management of society."<sup>7</sup> Like turn-of-the-century social reformers, Jacobs was keen to foster and empower the moral order of a village community within the impersonal metropolis. She condemned the neighborhood unit, a physical and social module she thought too large to function at the local scale of a street and too small to function like a district, that is, a neighborhood of interests with the critical mass to demand attention from city government.

Jacobs' critique galvanized an emergent reassessment of a putative culture of experts engaged in top-down planning. That movement, coupled with a more general suspicion of big plans, ushered in an era of incrementalism. Not surprisingly, proponents of localism, slow growth, and the status quo are advocates for neighborhood, and the term





remains a keyword and central tenet for contemporary development and planning. We see this in the renderings and find it in the writings of New Urbanists and their ilk. Here narrow streets and shallow setbacks evoke a prior age when children played on sidewalks under the watchful eyes of adults lingering on porches or stoops. Neighborhood is a first principle for the New Urbanism, and if you were to miss the visual cues in the graphics, the message is preeminent in their texts; hardly a page goes by without reference to neighborhood and what constitutes an ideal design. Increasingly people have come to see cities as a congeries of neighborhoods and, in some cases, such as Los Angeles, this has led to a decentralization of governance and the creation of neighborhood councils. The hope is that a localization of city government, planning, and service delivery will promote participation, enhance opportunity, and foster community.

Placing faith in a neighborhood fix is contrary to history and contemporary patterns of mobility, turnover, and heterogeneity. A neighborhood is a social phenomenon that takes place in a specific setting; both are contingent and dynamic. A district or smaller segment of a city that once functioned as and was perceived to be a neighborhood may no longer serve as such given changes in the economy, in demographics, and in lifestyle and preferences. Conversely, we can find numerous examples of city districts once devoted to production, warehousing, or trade never intended as neighborhoods that, through a process of conversion and gentrification, have become vibrant, thriving, and desirable communities and that are recognized as neighborhoods. The single factor that no neighborhood can be without is a critical mass of people. Everything else is variable. There is no

science of neighborhood, nor should there be a normative view of neighborhood. Many people believe they reside in and are part of a neighborhood, and a study of these people and their locales would reveal places of differing scale, an array of physical patterns, a variety and diversity of inhabitants, and boundaries and definition (both internal and external) that range from the obvious (gateways, shifts in land use, signature architecture, thoroughfares and freeways) to the obscure (note the proliferation of signs throughout Los Angeles specifying the boundaries of this or that neighborhood).

The terms we use when we talk about cities inform our understanding of present conditions and shape our assessment of possible futures. Neighborhood has been used to connote proximity and propinquity (neighboring) and to denote a template composed from a kit of parts (buildings, lots and blocks, and streets). Perhaps it is time to broaden the conversation, to consider a diversity of neighborhoods, and to account for the city of neighborhoods that Lewis Mumford and others have found in the historic fabric of Europe's and America's great cities.

<sup>1</sup> "Your Voice, Your Neighborhood, Your City," <http://www.lacity.org/done/>

<sup>2</sup> "Preamble," Charter of the New Urbanism, NY: McGraw-Hill: v

<sup>3</sup> Los Angeles Business Journal

<sup>4</sup> The Death and Life of Great American Cities, NY: Vintage: 119

<sup>5</sup> Burgess and Robert Park, The City: Suggestions for Investigation of Human Behavior in the Urban Environment, Chicago: University of Chicago: 145-6.

<sup>6</sup> Raymond Unwin, "Nothing Gained by Over-crowding" in Walter L. Creese, ed. The Legacy of Raymond Unwin: A Human Pattern for Planning, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1967. For a discussion of Parker and Unwin's design see Spiro Kostof, The City Shaped: Urban Patterns and Meanings Through History, Boston: Bulfinch Press, 1991.

<sup>7</sup> Jacobs, *ibid*: 114.

